

BEHIND THE "ANTI-AMERICANISM" OF MR. BEVAN

How Far Will It Take Him — and British Labor?

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THE leaders of the British Labor party have reason to feel thankful these days that the preferential primary is no part of Britain's political usage. If it were, the task of naming the party's next standard-bearer would be an easy one. Aneurin Bevan has gained so much ground in recent months, even among the trade union hierarchy, that next October's Labor party conference seems likely to witness the once improbable spectacle of the Old Guard trying to make peace with him on his own terms more or less. If anything can prevent him from swamping the conference, it is the bloc vote of certain major unions whose leadership remains loyal to the official policy. In a "beauty contest" among party members, as distinct from union members, he would sweep the board, and it is by no means certain that the electorate would turn him down if given the chance to choose between him and the Tories.

This of course is an academic issue for the moment, since nothing short of an earthquake will dislodge Mr. Churchill from No. 10 Downing Street, and while he remains there Labor will in all probability continue

to be led by Mr. Attlee. But it shows which way the wind is blowing. A year ago, even six months ago, the big question was whether Mr. Bevan would be expelled from the Labor party, and if so, how many rebels, if any, would join him in the wilderness. Today one asks whether he will carry the next Labor party conference with him, or be balked just short of his goal.

In all likelihood Bevan will be supported by at least two of the "Big Five" unions—the engineering and railwaymen's—plus several of the smaller unions (of which the electrical workers' is still Communist-led). He is gaining ground among the miners—the third largest of the "Big Five"—and is being firmly opposed only by the entrenched leadership of the two mammoth unions: the transport workers (Ernest Bevin's old supporters) and the municipal and "general" employees. Both are among the worst paid, and it will be surprising if their leadership holds out for long under the kind of economic pressure now building up.

Assuming that this shaky structure holds, the Old Guard can just—but only just—hope to carry the day next October, but at the cost of alienating the "divisional Labor parties," i.e., the 625 constituency organizations upon whose zeal and efficiency Labor's election chances depend. Their membership, about a million strong, is overwhelmingly Bevanite in sentiment, if nonetheless, paradoxically and illogically, loyal to Attlee so long as he remains at the head of the party—and so long as he avoids an open split!

Circumstances thus point towards a compromise, probably expressed in what the French call "*une résolution nègre-blanc*," that is, the kind of platform to which all factions can subscribe. That indefatigable go-between, Hugh Dalton, who has already

ANEURIN BEVAN, who in the event of a Labor victory might yet be the next Prime Minister of Britain, is a bewildering figure. A militant socialist, a vigorous anti-Communist (who criticized Churchill during the war for being too amiable to Stalin!), he has recently emerged as the leader of a political tendency with strong "neutralist" and "anti-American" sentiments. Here, GEORGE LICHTHEIM reports from London on what makes Bevan run—and why he is running off in this particular direction. Mr. Lichtheim is a frequent contributor to this magazine; his most recent article was "Britain's Prospects under Churchill" in the December 1951 issue. He is a member of the editorial staff of the British monthly *The Twentieth Century*.

reversed his party's stand on German rearmament, may be expected to play a leading role in such a transaction. But those who should know are inclined to believe that the tide runs too strongly towards Bevan for a compromise to be lasting unless it gives him the substance of what he wants: effective control of Labor's policy, if not the formal leadership for which he knows himself to be as yet unready. He is undoubtedly sincere when he says that he will never challenge Attlee for the leadership. But Attlee is sixty-nine, Morrison is sixty-six and ailing, and Bevan—who is only fifty-four and extremely hale—will look like the ideal standard-bearer by the time the next election comes round, say in two or three years. Cripps, the only man who could have stopped him, is dead.

THE factors making for this drift are many and most of them are obvious: pacifism, rearmament strains, Conservative unpopularity, and the stodginess of Labor's Old Guard. What is perhaps less obvious is Mr. Bevan's ability to capitalize on this situation. Hitherto he has played his cards well, and if he goes on avoiding major mistakes he will come within hailing distance of power. The question is: what kind of leader, and especially what kind of statesman in administration, is he going to turn out to be?

No one can safely try to answer this question by taking as his text Mr. Bevan's recently published semi-autobiographical tract for the times, *In Place of Fear* (Simon and Schuster). This is a curious piece of work, which over large stretches gives the impression of having been dictated in a hurry and then laid aside and forgotten. Its publication was something of an anticlimax: the ogre turned out to be surprisingly mild-mannered, introspective, and somewhat old-fashioned in his use of political clichés. One had been led to expect a call to action; what one got was a badly organized essay ruminating on a variety of topics in a style not calculated to raise anyone's blood pressure. Its author clearly has an imaginative cast of mind and a considerable stock of information; he is

civilized—he even quotes Stendhal; he is a democratic socialist who distrusts Russia and has not much use for American capitalism, though he is favorable to American democracy; he is emotionally a pacifist and a Little Englander, who yet realizes that Britain cannot stand alone; he knows where the present world danger comes from, but has no intention of meeting trouble halfway; he is rather inclined to imagine that if you have a perfect social system, you probably don't need to rearm. So far, so good, or rather, not so good—especially the last point. But what does it all add up to in terms of policy?

The answer is that it adds up to one practical recommendation and a good deal of wishful thinking. The practical advice—which most people here, Conservatives included, wish they could follow—can be summed up simply: be firm with the Americans; don't get rattled by talk that the United States may withdraw into isolation; America needs us as much as we need her, and if we take a firm line we can still make our influence felt, even if for the moment we are not solvent. This kind of advice is not altogether wasted on the personnel of the late Labor government, whose timidity in this respect has already been shown up by Mr. Churchill's success in getting away with a much firmer line. But it is not sufficient to constitute a policy. Not even when mixed with strident demands for a gigantic Point Four program—with America paying.

It is all very well for Mr. Bevan and his supporters to stress the need to help the backward countries, but they must know that (a) this is no substitute for a short-term defense policy, which remains essential on other grounds; (b) if regarded as a long-term project—which it is—it can only be undertaken by the United States. They do in fact know this, but try to evade the issue by establishing a claim to some specifically socialist remedy for the world's ills. Their argument is that only British (read: Labor) "pressure" can prevent the Americans from perverting the projected world plan for mutual aid into a drive to produce more strategic raw materials.

Thus we are led to regard as the core of the whole Bevanite program in foreign affairs a claim to some special recipe for dragging the "backward" countries out of their misery, by a suitable marriage of American (capitalist) technology and British (socialist) policy. And this is where the wishful thinking comes in, for the whole scheme boils down to giving America good advice about how to invest her surplus capital. Now this is not an entirely useless occupation, but to pretend that British Labor can build a socialist future in the role of a "kibitzer" in world affairs is really going a little far. Unfortunately this is what the "grand design," stripped of Mr. Michael Foot's and his collaborators' grandiose phraseology, comes down to in cold fact. Compared with this disingenuous nonsense, the Conservative mystique of Empire seems positively hardheaded.

The confusion, however, does not end there, for in addition to demanding a greatly stepped-up program for industrializing the backward countries, Mr. Bevan by a kind of afterthought adds a warning against "burning up" the raw-material reserves of the planet at too fast a rate, lest in a few years we all reach the point of "watching each other starve through expensive television sets." Faced with these and similar contradictions, some critics have tended to write off both the book and the author as hopelessly muddleheaded. It would be truer to say that there is an unresolved contradiction in his mind which at times makes him a puzzle even to his friends.

Intellectually, Mr. Bevan is on the side of "Progress," including the fastest possible rate of industrialization—for other countries. Thus, he complacently welcomes the pace of industrialization in Russia (on the grounds that highly skilled workers and technicians will not permanently put up with an autocratic form of government), while deploring its effects in Britain, and hinting rather strongly that industrial civilization is responsible for most of the world's ills. Emotionally, he hates both progress and civilization. There are times when he sounds

almost like a conservative—in the European, not the American, sense of the term, i.e., one who defends the pre-industrial tradition. He certainly detests liberalism, with its cult of efficiency and all-round mechanization, and has been known to say privately that if the only choice were between capitalism and the Middle Ages, he would plump for the latter. He dismisses the *Ersatz* medievalism of Franco and Salazar as a sham, but his real hatred is reserved for "Manchester" and all that Manchester stands for.

This is socialism all right—the socialism of Ruskin and Morris (and there is more than a hint of it in Marx, whom Mr. Bevan acclaims as his teacher). It is a socialism built upon resentment, not merely class resentment—though there is plenty of that in Mr. Bevan's psychological make-up—but resentment against everything that has happened in Britain since the Industrial Revolution. It is, in the precise sense of the term, a reaction against the upheaval—some would call it the disaster—that the Industrial Revolution brought about. This form of socialism is not exactly to the taste of the tough managerial politicians who dominate the Labor party's right wing, yet Cripps, who epitomized their creed, was also the personal friend and political ally of Aneurin Bevan. The fact is that Labor cannot do without the kind of inspiration which the British left has always drawn from its frequently romantic vision of both the future and the past.

THERE is, however, something to be said, on strictly factual grounds, for the Bevanite attitude. It is generally agreed that British industry must be made more efficient, and that there never was a time when British socialists could less afford to neglect the problem of productivity. But there is a curious silence on such questions as craftsmanship in industry, or the effects of excessive urbanization.

The fact is that the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century was paid for in Britain—and in Britain alone—by an upheaval which came near to destroying agriculture and the traditional crafts. Both have survived, but

only just. A comparison with other European countries discloses the significant fact that those which today are most prosperous are also distinguished by the retention of the traditional craft basis in industry. It is no accident that Sweden and Switzerland are at the top of the ladder, that Germany is fast regaining her export markets, and that Belgium is prosperous despite some structural unemployment. France, but for her political misfortunes, would soon rank in the same class. In all these countries, industrialization has been a comparatively slow and organic affair, and has consequently left fewer scars and resentments than it did in Britain.

Revolutions can be ruinous, and industrial revolutions are no exception. Britain is not merely over-urbanized and over-industrialized, but over-industrialized in the wrong way. Her factories produce too many textile goods for export to vanishing overseas markets, and too little of the high-grade mechanical and electrical equipment on which Sweden and Switzerland have built their astonishing prosperity. There are admittedly some economic problems common to all European countries, and notably to those cursed with a heritage of colonial possession and consequent dependence upon exports of textiles and other cheap staples. But these problems tend to find their most concentrated expression in Britain, and socialists of Mr. Bevan's persuasion cannot wholly be blamed for feeling that they have entered upon an unlucky inheritance. When, in addition, a large millstone, in the form of an outsize rearmament program, is tied round their necks, it is scarcely surprising if at times a note almost of desperation creeps into their discourse.

Once the matter is viewed in this perspective, it becomes clearer, not merely why Mr. Bevan resigned from the Labor government, but why his resignation very nearly split the party. To say that he was emotionally distressed by petty cuts in the health service is only part of the story, and a part of lesser importance. Genuine economic issues were involved, as has since been made clear by the Conservative government's de-

cision to scale down the defense program. It may or may not be true that Mr. Ernest Bevin committed the cabinet to a fantastically high estimate of what Britain could do, in order to cheer the Europeans, but it is no longer much of a secret that the announcement of the original British rearmament program took Washington by surprise and produced some off-the-record doubts about her ability to execute such an ambitious scheme.

Yet all this would have mattered less if the Labor party had not begun to feel dejected about the country's economic position generally, and about the efficacy of the so-called planning methods applied since 1945. The willingness to shoulder burdens comes easier if there is confidence that one is on the right road. The Labor party has lacked such confidence since 1950, and is today no longer in a mood to give *carte blanche* to the old leadership which dominated the 1945-51 government. It is not quite ready yet to put its trust in Mr. Bevan, but will in the end accept him if no serious competitor turns up. At the moment, his worst handicap is the inadequacy of the people who surround him, and his own apparent tendency to seek advice in the wrong quarters. But the dearth of talent is as marked among his opponents, and some of the abler left-of-center figures are quietly moving towards his camp. The present undercurrent being what it is, he has only to wait.

WE KNOW what Mr. Bevan is like in opposition. What would he be like as head of a government? Probably a great deal more reasonable than he now seems, say those who know him best. One must hope so, for his recent public statements have in some instances displayed not merely vagueness about facts but an awkward misjudgment of what the facts mean.

To take the most conspicuous instance of all: he still goes about repeating that Russia's inadequate steel output is by itself a sufficient guarantee of peace. He made a point of that in his book, when he wrote that "a steel production of 30 million tons

per annum, servicing a population of more than 200 millions, provides no basis for blitzkrieg methods of war"; and at the press conference he gave when the book appeared in print, he similarly declared he did not think that "35 million tons of steel [apparently including the satellites] would launch themselves against 200 million"—itself an excessive figure. On this whole subject, his views, as the *Manchester Guardian* remarked, "are notable for their divorce from reality." The fact is that 30 million tons per annum are ample for war-making, especially when there is a prospect of quickly annexing the whole production of Western Europe as well. But even without the Ruhr, present Russian output will go a long way. Germany, with much less than 30 million, came near to conquering the world. It has been calculated that a Soviet output of 10,000 tanks, 10,000 105-millimeter howitzers, 5,000 4.5-inch guns, 50 submarines of 1,250 tons, and 10,000 aircraft (including 4,000 bombers) would require less than a million tons of ingot steel. In 1943, at the height of the struggle with Hitler, Russia produced slightly less than 10 million tons of steel, and that was quite enough to maintain an annual output of 40,000 planes, 30,000 tanks and self-propelled guns, and masses of other arms.

Now all these figures are on record, as is the fact that, together with its satellites, the Soviet Union disposes of almost 40 million tons of steel annually, which is five million more than Hitler had at the height of his power, when he had overrun most of Europe. There is thus no excuse for talking nonsense about Russia's steel shortage, but nonsense is what Mr. Bevan and his acolytes have been talking nonetheless. To say that they are in good faith is merely to affirm that there are some subjects on which they prefer to remain ignorant.

The matter might be put differently by saying that the Bevanites continue to believe in the existence and practicability of something called "a socialist foreign policy." They reason that, since British foreign policy in the 19th century was manifestly guided by such "abstract"—but highly practical—notions

as the desirability of spreading constitutional government and free trade around the globe, why not peace and socialism now? The true answer, of course, is that Britain has not the strength to enforce these policies; she can hope only to influence the United States in the right direction. Faced with this uncomfortable fact, the more utopian left-wingers cast around for a "third force" position. Thus, Mrs. Barbara Castle, who sits with Mr. Bevan on the Labor party executive, recently told a Fabian audience that it was a terrible thing for British Labor to be lined up with imperialist America against "the working-class governments" of Russia and Eastern Europe. She was, of course, quite sure that the Marshall Plan had no object beyond helping America to get rid of surplus consumer goods.

The interest of such remarks lies in the fact that Mrs. Castle is probably a shade more intelligent and better informed than the average member of the Labor party. When one asks what kind of leadership Mr. Bevan is going to supply, one asks in fact whether he will eventually get rid of the bodyguard of mediocrities and sentimentalists who currently surround him. It would be pleasant to be able to answer this question in the affirmative, but the fact is that no one knows.

IT MUST be conceded that U.S. foreign policy, even as represented by the present State Department, makes it needlessly difficult for realistic Labor party experts on foreign affairs, as represented by Denis Healey, to stem the tide of Bevanism. It is also extremely difficult for moderate socialists here to take American unofficial liberalism seriously when they come across such productions as the recent Americans for Democratic Action publication, *The Only War We Seek*—with its solemn offer to the Chinese to teach them the elements of Confucianism in preference to Western democratic concepts! What is one to make of "liberals" who argue in all seriousness that Communism must be opposed because it is a menace to—guess what?—the subhuman

Asiatic family system (which Asiatic religion merely validates) with its treatment of women and children as beasts of burden! Faced with such abysmal imbecility—don't these liberal Machiavellians know that feminine emancipation is Communism's biggest trump card in the East?—one feels inclined to give the battle up for lost before it has started.

If this is American liberalism, what are the American conservatives like? Apparently they are either like Taft or like Eisenhower. Neither stirs much enthusiasm here, though Eisenhower is naturally more popular in official circles. The fact must be faced that since the dissolution of the Rooseveltian "mystique," America has ceased to mean much to the ordinary person here. Marshall Aid, gracelessly proffered and sulkily received, is no substitute for a common purpose. Proposals for a "crusade" to liberate the Iron Curtain countries rouse alarm; evidence of a tendency to hog all military top commands provokes resentment. There is not much cordiality in the Atlantic alliance at the moment, and Bevanism feeds upon this sentiment, or lack of sentiment, among many others.

The average Labor party supporter does not take the Communist hate campaign

against America seriously; he merely wishes Britain were more independent, and not compelled to rearm. When on top of his various grudges he is told that there is really no need for massive rearmament, he naturally listens. And when the socialist intelligentsia, who more or less provide his mental food, encourage him in his native dislike of foreigners, he needs no further stimulus for throwing his support to Bevan. Once let the notion sink in that "we are being pushed around" and that Bevan "wants to stand up to the Americans," and the rest is a formality.

In the long run, Labor is a democratic party. It may take time, but in the end the man whom the ordinary party member wants is bound to come to the top. Bevan is nearly there. Paradoxically, his presence at the head of the party, and possibly at the head of the next Labor government, might turn out a blessing for the Atlantic cause, since he is by now practically invulnerable to the charge of warmongering or unreasoned hostility to Russia, and his vague program of "appeasement" would probably dissolve into a few empty gestures; there is no reason to doubt his strong and basic anti-Communism. But that is looking ahead. For the moment, his progress is adding to the stresses under which the Atlantic alliance is laboring.

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